



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

Managing California's Working Lands

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CALIFORNIA CONTINUES TO LOSE PRIME FARMLAND, REASONS BECOMING MORE COMPLEX

Department of Conservation Issues Latest Report on Statewide Land-Use Change

SACRAMENTO -- Irrigated farmland decreased in California by about 263 square miles from 2008-2010, according to the latest land-use change data from the Department of Conservation (DOC). Although more than 102,000 acres of the highest-quality agricultural soil, known as prime farmland, were included in that decrease, the California Farmland Conversion Report also noted that the amount of urbanization in the state was a record low.

"Urban land increased by 44,504 acres. This was the lowest urbanization rate recorded since our first such report and likely reflected the impact of the recent economic recession," DOC Director Mark Nechodom said. "More than urbanization, long-term land idling was the biggest factor in the decrease of irrigated farmland."

The Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP), part of DOC's Division of Land Resource Protection, was established in 1982 to document the location and extent of California's important farmlands, and to report on how they change over time. The survey covers about 98 percent of the privately owned land in the state, 49.1 million acres in 49 counties. Land-use change data for most counties goes back to 1984.

"Our maps are used in the planning process to gauge how planning decisions impact agricultural land around the state," FMMP Manager Molly Penberth said. "Identifying strategic farmland resources is an important first step in maintaining California's agricultural vitality."

The 13th biennial FMMP report can be found here: http://www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/fmmp/Pages/FMMP_2008-2010_FCR.aspx. The program uses aerial imagery and land management data gathered from local governments, combining that with soil quality data in a geographic information system (GIS) to produce maps and statistics.

"Since the program began, more than 1.4 million acres have been removed from farming use, 47 percent of that being prime farmland," Penberth said. "That's about a square mile every four days for a total area bigger than Merced County. California remains the nation's leader in agricultural production, and there's still a lot of

agricultural land out there. But farmers and ranchers are continually trying to do more with less.”

During the 2008-2010 mapping cycle, nearly 70 square miles -- 44,504 acres -- of land were converted to urban use, a 39 percent decrease relative to the 2006-2008 period. Thirteen percent of the new urbanization occurred in Riverside County (5,874 acres), including the largest single commercial development statewide, the 190-acre Sun City Shadow Hills community in Indio. San Diego and Los Angeles counties each added more than 4,000 acres of urbanized land, while Kern, Kings, and Fresno counties added more than 3,000 each. Included within the urban increases was community infrastructure such as water retention basins, which were a significant component of the conversion in southern San Joaquin Valley counties.

The report noted: “Housing and commercial development projects were significantly scaled back in size compared with prior mapping cycles.”

Land idling remained the largest factor in irrigated land decreases. Five counties had 10,000 or more acres of idled agricultural land: Fresno, Kings, Kern, Sacramento and San Joaquin. Fresno County had the largest conversion of this type, at more than 34,000 acres.

“Land idling was especially acute on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, where there are issues with the ongoing drought and increased soil salinity,” Penberth noted. “The San Joaquin Valley accounted for half of the 168,000-acre net decrease in irrigated land we detailed. In the Delta counties, environmental restoration and potential development were behind most of the agricultural land idling.”

In Kings County, the expansion of dairies prompted the FMMP to reclassify more than 1,100 acres out of the irrigated category. Dairies are one of the most important agricultural uses in Kings County, but the facilities are classified as farmland of local importance rather than prime farmland in the report.

Elsewhere in the state, land was brought into irrigated agricultural use to support high value crops. Merced County had a 5,964-acre net increase of irrigated agricultural land, while Stanislaus County added 3,455 acres and Madera County 1,181 acres. Most of those were blocks of orchards -- primarily almonds -- or vineyards. The largest single orchard expansion occupied nearly four square miles. Tehama County had a net gain in agricultural acreage thanks mainly to 1,500 acres of new olive groves. Glenn County had a 64 percent increase in olive acreage from 2008-2010, and the largest olive processing facility in the United States opened there during this period. Despite these factors, Glenn County had a net loss of more than 500 acres of agricultural land.

The central coast counties of Monterey, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara each had small net increases -- less than 1,000 acres each -- in their irrigated farmland footprint. Much of that growth was associated with vineyards and limited vegetable crop expansions.

The FMMP’s map and report classify agricultural land under one of the following categories based on soil quality and irrigation status: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland or Farmland of Local Importance. Other categories include Grazing Land, Urban and Built-up Land, Other Land

and Water. The FMMP tracks the changes in the acreage of each type of land; provides data on a statewide, regional and individual county level; and also provides a narrative field report that gives a snapshot of what's happening in each county.

“Although the pace of urbanization slowed in this mapping cycle, it's likely to speed up again as the economy gets stronger,” said John Lowrie, assistant director for the Division of Land Resource Protection. “You have to be proactive about preserving farmland because land-use change sneaks up on you. In the lifetime of many Californians, Los Angeles County and the Silicon Valley were among the nation's top agricultural counties. That's no longer the case. And in recent years, the factors contributing to prime farmland loss have become more complex. The San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys are examples of the diverse influences affecting farmland resources. The 2012 data for many of these counties is now available or being released in the months ahead.

“One thing to remember about good land for growing food and fiber: They're not making any more of it.”

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